

# The moral landscape of Herodotus' *Histories*

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**M**oving around the world does not just mean moving through space, it also means encountering a world of good and evil. Katherine Clarke takes a trip through Herodotus' moral landscape.

## Crossing to the Promised Land: entering the Gardens of Midas

*There is, however, in this land a river, to which the Argive descendants of these men offer sacrifice as their saviour. This river, when the sons of Temenus had crossed it, rose in such flood that the horsemen could not cross. So the brothers came to another part of Macedonia and settled near the place called the Gardens of Midas, son of Gordias, where roses grow spontaneously, each bearing sixty blossoms and with a fragrance that surpassed all others.*

So, Herodotus, Greek historian of the Persian wars, relates how the ancestors of Alexander the Great reached their royal seat of Macedonia. Alexander's distant ancestor, Perdiccas, and his two older brothers, in flight from the horsemen of the Macedonian king, cross a river that rises up to bar the way to their pursuers. The good characters thus reach their idyllic destination in another part of Macedonia, the flower-filled gardens of Midas, their Promised Land, where they establish their kingdom.

This tale, semi-historical and semi-mythical, perfectly illustrates the way in which landscapes in Herodotus' narrative may 'come to life', take part in the story, and act as barometers of human behaviour. The river assists the 'good' characters and stands in the way of their pursuers. An obvious Old Testament parallel for this motif offers itself in the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites en route for their promised land pursued by the Egyptians, the 'wicked rulers' of that story.

The crossing into the Gardens of Midas, like that of the Israelites into the Promised Land, appeals partly because it is a story of 'good' and 'evil'. The good characters get across the water to found their new nation, while the bad ones are stopped in their tracks. The fact that the water acts as

an ally to the good and an enemy to the bad underlines their moral status. It's a way of characterizing them through their relationship with the landscape itself. But the fact that Herodotus is using classic story motifs, narrative patterns familiar from other texts, might raise questions about how we read him as a historian. Can we trust the accuracy of his account when it contains set-piece, almost formulaic, story-lines like this? Maybe not, but the episode illuminates Herodotus' wider interest in landscape and geography, not just as neutral backdrop for his historical narrative but as something a bit more interesting, even a morally charged entity.

## Moving mountains

Let us see how this plays out in two iconic episodes from book 7 of Herodotus' *Histories*. In preparation for his massive imperialist campaign against Greece in 480 B.C., the Persian king Xerxes was not to be outdone by nature. A previous expedition had suffered terrible losses in storms a couple of years before when attempting to sail around the Athos peninsula in northern Greece, so, in order to avoid a repetition of this disaster, Xerxes orders a canal to be dug right through the isthmus of Mount Athos, effectively turning land into sea.

What might be seen as a practical measure to ensure safe passage is presented by Herodotus as an aggressive vanity project motivated partly by Xerxes' competition with the grandiose schemes of his ancestors, partly by the wish visibly to flex his muscles and partly by the need to immortalize himself in a lasting (and possibly vengeful) transformation of the very landscape which had previously destroyed a large part of his fleet.

*As far as I can judge, Xerxes gave the command for this digging out of pride, wishing to display his power and leave a memorial; with no trouble they could have drawn their*

*ships across the isthmus, yet he ordered them to dig a canal from sea to sea, wide enough to float two triremes rowed abreast.*

## Whipping men, whipping the sea

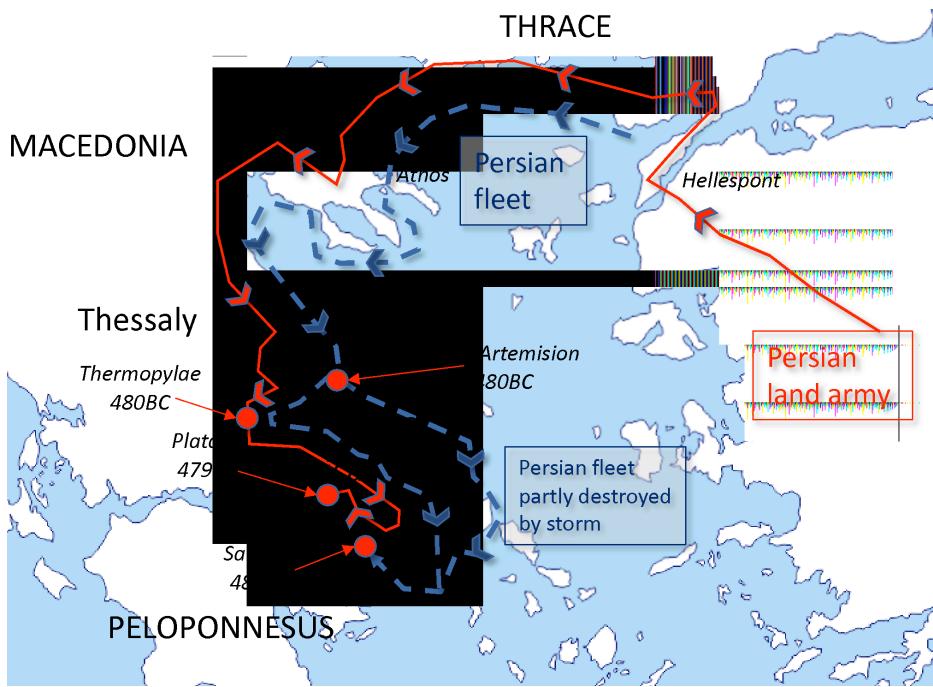
The men assigned to digging through Mount Athos are lashed as they work, an image that recurs with even greater resonance in our next iconic episode, the famous show-down between Xerxes and the sea. When Xerxes is finally ready to lead his army across Asia in pursuit of conquest over Europe and Greece in particular, he finds himself faced with the obstacle of the Hellespont to cross. This time it is water that needs to be turned into land in a mirror image of the Athos canal. No problem for the first-rate engineering skills of the Persians and their multi-national force – the Phoenician troops construct a bridge made of flaxen cables, while the Egyptians do the same with papyrus.

*But no sooner had the strait been bridged than a great storm swept down, breaking and scattering everything. When Xerxes heard of this, he was very angry and ordered that the Hellespont be whipped with three hundred lashes, and a pair of fetters thrown into the sea. I have even heard that he sent branders with them to brand the Hellespont.*

*He commanded them while they whipped to utter words outlandish and presumptuous, 'Bitter water, our master thus punishes you because you did him wrong, though he had done you none. Xerxes the king will pass over you, whether you want it or not; in accordance with justice no one offers you sacrifice, for you are a turbid and salty river.'*

*He commanded that the sea receive these punishments and that the overseers of the bridge over the Hellespont be beheaded.*

Herodotus' negative presentation of Xerxes' behaviour is obvious. The whip-



Map of the Aegean showing the route of Xerxes' invasion.

ping and branding of the sea and issuing of insults, downgrading the sea to a river, indicate his outrage at being opposed by the landscape. His violence against nature and the image of him enslaving it with fetters is matched by his violence against its human architects, who are summarily executed. And when the journey is finally achieved over a repaired pontoon bridge, Xerxes' men cross the Hellespont 'under the lash' for seven days and nights. Xerxes' response to nature's opposition is characterized by rage, fury, and punishment, his passion for conquest unstoppable, and this is characteristic of Persian kings throughout Herodotus' narrative from book 1 onwards, where King Cyrus punishes the river Gyndes for drowning one of his horses by dividing its water into 360 channels.

### Alliance and war

The idea that nature is an opponent of Persia is reinforced by Herodotus throughout the narrative. Xerxes' adviser, Artabanus, warns him against his massive expedition on the grounds that the larger he makes it, 'the more these two – land and sea – are your enemies' (*polemiota*). Later in book 7, nature indeed throws everything it can against the Persians – wrecking their ships through storms, and at the start of book 8 this happens on two fronts, as the fleet is beaten back by storms and the land army hit by falling rocks as they pass Delphi in their bid for Athens. By contrast, Persia's victims are described as nature's 'allies' with the winds explicitly on the Greek side and the northerly Scythians seen as allies (*symmachoi*) of their rivers. The language is that of real warfare. Persian kings lord it over nature,

just as they seek conquest over peoples, and engage in battle with the landscapes they encounter, while the natural world assists the innocent victims of Persian imperialism.

### Desire or control?

But the picture is rarely so straightforward. Herodotus may present Persia's attempts to control nature as part of their aggressive imperialism, projects which enable the Persian kings to attack and take over the lands of others and whose failure is met with violent rage. However, he makes no effort to hide his admiration and wonder at other magnificent feats of engineering which alter the landscape no less – the Egyptian pyramids and the spectacular tunnels in Samos are seen as wonderful human achievements. Do even the extraordinary pontoon bridges which Xerxes and, before him, his father Darius at the Bosphorus, used to turn water into land and bridge whole continents, come in for their share of stunned amazement?

More broadly, Herodotus presents Persian kings as having an uneasy love-hate relationship with nature. King Cyrus would never travel without a jar of water from the Choaspes river, so strongly was he attached to it. Xerxes' own father, Darius, after bridging the Bosphorus, is presented by Herodotus as an admiring spectator of the natural landscape which he has managed to tame:

*There he sat on a headland and viewed the Pontus [the Black Sea], a marvellous sight. For it is the most wonderful sea of all. Its length is 11,100 stades, and its breadth 3,300 stades at the widest point. The channel at the entrance of this sea*

*is 4 stades across; the narrow neck of the channel, called Bosphorus, across which the bridge was thrown, is about 120 stades long. The Bosphorus reaches as far as to the Propontis; and the Propontis is 500 stades wide and 1,400 long; its outlet is the Hellespont, which is no wider than 7 stades and 400 stades long. The Hellespont empties into a gulf of the sea which we call Aegean.*

It's interesting how quickly here the character of Darius, the Persian king, blends into the character of Herodotus, the historian. Herodotus' own interest in geography and landscape, given extra authority by the inclusion of all the vital statistics, is shared by one of the aggressive imperialists in his narrative. Should we distinguish between Herodotus the scholar and Darius the conqueror, or are they disarmingly similar to each other? The Persians look on nature with desire, but this quickly spills over into a desire to control and conquer, placing them in an ambiguous light.

Even the apparently clear-cut scene at the Hellespont, where Xerxes' frenzied desire for conquest results in the metaphor of opposition to nature being realized with actual whips and fetters, may be given a softer edge when we appreciate that the 'salty river' to which he downgrades the continental strait is, in fact, standard Persian terminology for the limits of their empire.

The landscape of Herodotus' historical narrative acts as more than a mere backdrop to events. It also acts as a moral barometer, allowing us to gauge whether to view characters as 'good' or 'bad'. The fact that we find this motif not just in Herodotus, but also in other literature such as the Old Testament, suggests that the coding was probably familiar and clear and would have been understood by Herodotus' audience and readers. But the clear-cut judgements implied by the ebbing and flowing of the Red Sea are replaced in Herodotus by greater ambiguity – more thought-provoking and always open to re-interpretation.

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